The Lockhart Catalyst

Building St James Church at the Old Site, 1953

Canon John Warby

Foreword

Recent histories of Aboriginal missions and settlements have revealed the many cases of paternalism, authoritarian control and Eurocentric dominance which the inmates had to suffer. This was particularly true in Queensland where the State Government legislated as early as 1897 to control Aboriginal lives in an unprecedented manner. It was under this and subsequent legislation that all missions and settlements operated, most of them assuming without question that their charges were childlike, primitive, and in need of a firm controlling hand. These were the prevailing attitudes when John Warby arrived at the Anglican mission at Lockhart River in northeast Cape York Peninsula in 1951 as a new superintendent.

The mission had suffered its share of authoritarian rule since its inception in 1924, and after John Warby's departure in 1960, it was to go through an even more difficult time when the Queensland government took over direct control around 1967. "Warby-time" as it was known in the Lockhart vernacular, was well-remembered when I commenced anthropological fieldwork at Lockhart River in 1971. Compared with other times, and in contrast to the bleak period of bureaucratic institutionalisation they were going through then, John Warby's nine years at Lockhart River were fondly remembered as a period when Aboriginal people were, for the first time, actually encouraged to participate in decision-making, and to play a major role in routine administration. His period is notable as well for being one when there were no removals from the mission.

As the government regime became increasingly harsh at Lockhart River during the 1970s, the adults looked back more and more to "Warby-time", and it was increasingly viewed as a bright and idyllic period when people were "happy", when individuals had the opportunity to express themselves freely, and when European staff were willing to listen and to act on Aboriginal advice. Like most idylls, these views were framed as a

contradistinction to the bleak realities of the time, and no doubt contained some distortions and historical simplifications. But there could be no doubting the sincerity of feelings towards John Warby and his staff. The yearning for happier days at the old mission site from which they had been removed, led to a number of Aboriginal schemes to return there in defiance; but these were firmly opposed by the government regime. In this historical vignette of the raising of St James church there are, I think, strong resonances of these feelings for "Warby-time". While some of the detail of this era is fading as that generation of participants have died, there is a strong Lockhart oral tradition which ensures its place in the local view of history.

Athol Chase

One naturally expects an established Christian Mission to have a church, but such was not the case when the writer arrived at Lockhart River Mission in April 1951, as the Church of England lay missionary/Superintendent and with few clues as to what was expected of him. After nearly six years in the AIF, including spells in Palestine, the Western Desert, Syria, New Guinea and Borneo, the following five years had been spent pearling from Thursday Island (T.I.). Now the prospect of being a missionary among Aborigines, some of whom had worked with me on my boats, presented a fresh challenge.

Many years ago, in the 1920s, a small church had been built at Bare Hill, as the locality was known, using light saplings covered with bark, carried in from the bush on the heads and shoulders of the people. The church was sited on a levelled patch of ground on the corner of the foot track above the school. This track led from the four staff houses facing the sea, to the village about a third of a mile away. Situated on the corner of the right-angled track, the church would have been visible both from the village to the south and the staff houses to the east. Apart from the levelled site, no sign of this church remained. It was probably burnt down during the war when the mission was evacuated for six months in 1942 but, right now, the building of a place of worship was not high on the list of priorities. Other matters intruded.

The whole person

It is important to understand that the Mission of the Church to the Aboriginal people was a Mission to their "whole persons", including their physical, medical, material and educational needs and was not simply concerned with the spirituality of the people. This principle was emphasized constantly by Bishop John Hudson and it was foremost in all our dealings with these original inhabitants of Australia, who were now outcasts in the land which they had occupied and loved for countless generations.

Now their own land was taken from them, their ancient culture largely destroyed, their once numerous tribes mere remnants of once vigorous thousands, whittled down relentlessly by massacres, strange new diseases, oppression, starvation and broken hearts. They fought heroically with spears against guns and had paid the inevitable and bitter price of defeat. Woe to the conquered! The only way the Church could minister to the scattered survivors was by gathering them together in a suitable communal area such as an Aboriginal Reserve where they could be befriended, housed, hospitalised, healed, helped and educated by a few committed people of goodwill, who cared about them as people made in the image and likeness of God.

With nominal State Government financial assistance for Lockhart River Mission, and with meagre Church financial resources for this venture, the Church nevertheless deliberately set out to cater for the social, medical, educational, housing and spiritual needs of every man, woman and child who opted to come to the mission. The mere gathering together of these hundreds of people from various tribes, inflicted a stressful lifestyle upon them, as they took their places alongside one another to learn the new ways of life now being offered to them.

The culture shock inflicted upon the Aboriginals, resulting from the impact of the coming of the white man, the need to live alongside people from other tribes who were essentially "foreigners", and the imposition of new ways and means of living, cannot be over estimated. It was to force irrevocable change upon them in the space of a few years, and it says much for their resilience, adaptability and intelligence that they have not only survived the terrible years of the past, but have largely learned to cope and often to thrive in the face of great adversity.

The general scene

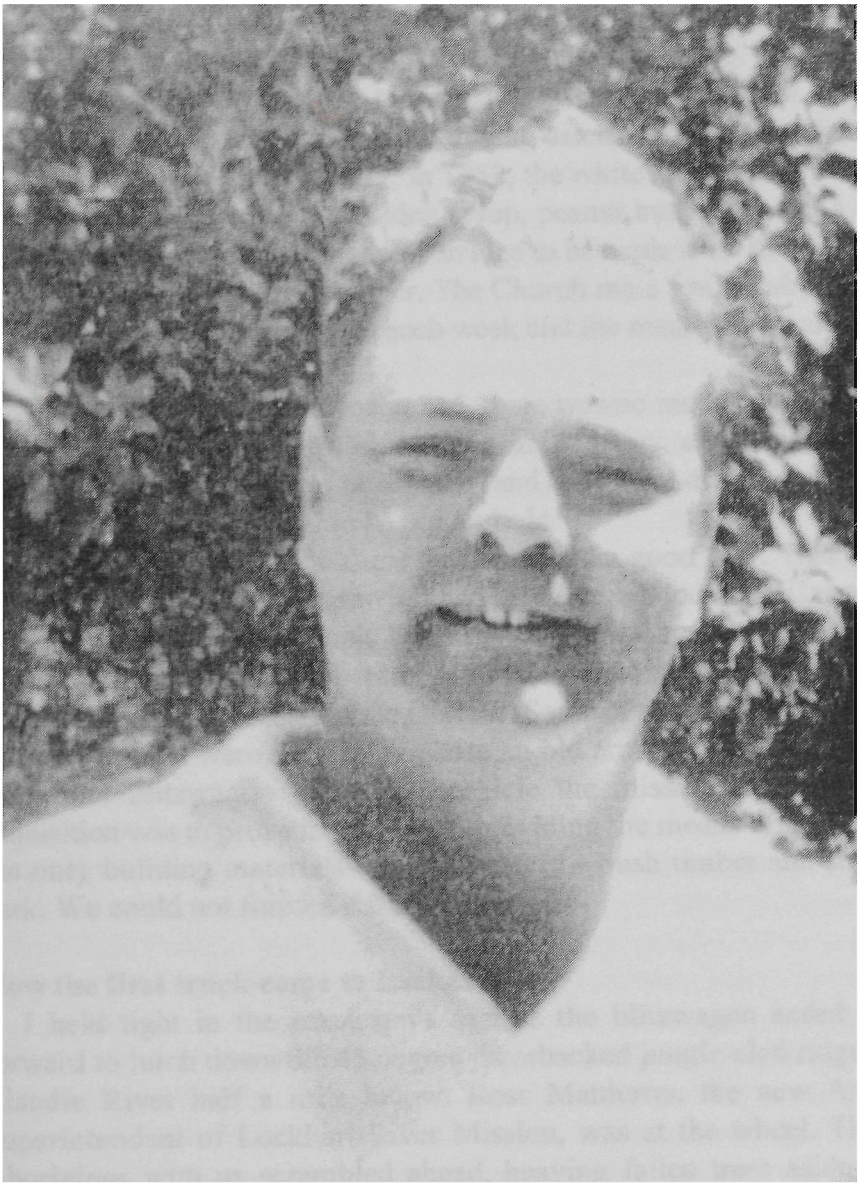
The village itself, soon to be known as the Old Village, was situated on a low rise where the grey sand changed to rich, red volcanic loam. Here the bush gave way to rainforest which, when cleared, provided very fertile ground for cultivation. This patch of excellent soil, perhaps 200 acres in area, was the main reason for moving the people here in 1925 from the original site, established in 1924 at Waterhole, near Orchid Point on the south side of Lloyds Bay. There the soil had been mainly sour, sandy, and unproductive for growing vegetables such as sweet potatoes, taro, pumpkins and cassava which supplemented the consistent diet of fish, turtle, dugong and other seafood.

In 1951 Miss Alice Hann was the missionary schoolteacher, Sister Doris Brown was the missionary nursing sister and Fr A.E. Briggs was the Chaplain of the Church of England. All were single, living alone in small houses. Along with my wife Bunty, we were the entire staff of the mission. However Bunty would not join us in our two bedroom house, known as the mission house, for another six months, bringing with her our brand new seven month old son Christopher, who had been in need of specialist medical attention in Brisbane, and our son John, aged two. June, our eldest child, of four years, was already on the mission, having accompanied me from T.I. on the *Melbidir*.

Church services were held in the only place possible, an unlined, unceiled weatherboard school building thirty yards from the beach. Strongly built along the usual lines of a small country town community hall, it lacked both character and atmosphere and served anonymously as a church for funerals, weddings and Sunday services, a dance hall when required, as well as the school during the week.

Early in 1952 Fr Biggs returned to his home town in Victoria after more than three years service and, a few months later, his place was taken by Fr Sagi Ambar, a Torres Strait Island priest. The construction of a new church had been discussed with both these Chaplains but, while we explored the possibility of building a church, it was obvious that new and additional, permanent homes to replace the tumbledown, earth-floored shacks of the village were needed more urgently.

As ever, money was of the "chooks' teeth" variety. In 1951 the State Government paid the Church of England Diocese of Carpentaria a meagre



14. Ross Keith Matthews
b. 1926 Barossa Valley S.A.; d. 20 May 1952 at Lockhart River Mission N.Q.

annual grant of £750 to supplement the Church's voluntary outlay at Lockhart River Mission. The Government also provided a basic weekly food ration per adult consisting of 7 lbs. of white flour, 1 lb. of sugar, with baking soda and cream of tartar, and lesser amounts for children. Malnutrition was commonplace. Following discussions with the Protector of Aborigines, Mr Con O'Leary, in 1952, the white flour was replaced by wholemeal flour. Molasses, golden syrup, peanut butter, hops and tinned milk were also provided, enabling porridge to be made from the wholemeal flour as well as bread and damper. The Church ran a few hundred head of cattle, two of which were killed each week and the meat was handed out to all families.

So far as buildings were concerned, there was no money available. The economic outlook of the mission was grim, but tiny, earth-floored, over-crowded humpies needed to be replaced and additional dwellings built. The building of the church had to be put on hold.

Fortunately in 1952 the *Cape Grey* had had a good year. This 36 foot gaff-rigged cutter, which the writer had sold to the Diocese of Carpentaria when he closed his pearling business on Thursday Island to become Superintendent, was now operating from Lockhart River Mission with an Aboriginal crew, on behalf of the Diocese. Some of the profit from her sales of trochus shell were used to purchase an old army vehicle - a 1942 4x2 Chevrolet blitzwagon - the first vehicle the mission had owned. Its acquisition was to prove invaluable in providing the means of transporting the only building materials we could afford - bush timber and sheets of bark. We could not foresee the consequences.

How the first truck came to Lockhart

I held tight in the passenger's seat as the blitzwagon eased slowly forward to lurch down the 45 degree razorbacked jungle-clad ridge to the Claudie River half a mile below. Ross Matthews, the new Assistant Superintendent of Lockhart River Mission, was at the wheel. The four Aborigines with us scrambled ahead, heaving fallen trees aside, axing through the occasional one too heavy to move, lopping off intruding branches, slicing through the clinging, thorny lawyer-vine with a swinging machete as they cleared a narrow track on the spine of the ridge down which the blitz, in first gear, slowly ground its way. To either side the slope

fell sharply at about 60 degrees. This overgrown, steep ridge was the only way to reach the ford across the brown river below.

"Try the top ford John," George, the Iron Range airstrip groundsman had said, casually rolling a smoke, "had a bit of rain, river's up a bit, mightn't get through the lower one." Now we were on our way to the top ford. The airstrip lay a few miles behind us and 30 miles beyond that the lonely port of Portland Roads.

Long before daylight I had sailed to the port on *Mary Lockhart*, the mission's 32 foot boat, to meet the *SS Wandana*, John Burkes' ship enroute to Brisbane from Thursday Island, carrying the blitzwagon and Ross Matthews who, at my suggestion, was coming to Lockhart River Mission. As the 10 year old truck was lifted from the deck and swung high in the air before being dumped on the wharf, our eyes gleamed as we realised what changes such a vehicle could help bring about at the mission, 40 miles to the south. "She's old but she's a beaut!", Ross said enthusiastically. "Been right over her and she's in good nick. Searched all over T.I. for some bits and pieces and had some parts flown up from Cairns. Pity she's not four wheel drive but she'll do. You'll see!"

Now with Ross at the wheel we skidded to a stop on the greasy bank of the river, about 30 yards wide at this point, muddy brown from the run-off of recent storms, with rain still falling from a sullen sky and dripping steadily from the leafy canopy overhead. No sun penetrated here; the jungle crowded to the water's edge and giant trees met over head. "Looks deep," I said, gazing at the muddy waters rolling by. "Hey Sandy! See how deep!" With a flash of teeth to match his white hair, Sandy Captain picked up a six foot stick to test the depth of the river and stepped cautiously into the stream. One step followed another as he waded forward; even thirty feet from the bank we could see it was only up to his knees.

"No trouble", grunted Ross, "let's go," and slammed the blitz into low gear and let the clutch out. "Only take a minute." In we rolled and slowly surged forward, only to see, to our consternation, the front wheels disappear and water rise over the bonnet, stopping the blitz midstream. "Bloody hell", growled Ross as we stepped out into four feet of muddy water, "how come it's so deep?"

We soon found out. Sandy, in sounding the depth, had walked out along a huge submerged log and sounded along it, and we had driven in alongside

it![1] The blitz was not a 4WD and had no geared winch mounted in front, but we had come prepared; we knew that we had to cut a 60 mile semi-circular track to the mission as we went, over countless small and large creeks - steep, deep and shallow - through bush and rainforest. Our shovels, axes, mattocks, ropes, towing chains and a brand new stump puller, capable of heaving stumps from the ground, made us confident that we'd soon be out of this mess.

First we attacked the engine, removing the battery, the coil, distributor and spark plug leads, storing them on the opposite bank under a swag. "Now let's rig this beauty," said Ross of the stump puller. "Last time I used one was at home in the Barossa Valley." Soon the puller was rigged across the river from the bumper-bar to a tree and Ross, 6 feet 4 inches, 22 stone and immensely strong, applied himself to the lever with a bit of help from me. "Come on, me beauty," he groaned as together we worked on the lever and come she did, about two feet, before the puller stripped its gear with our exertions and we knew it was useless to continue. "Now what!" he exploded.

"A cuppa might help", I said, and told Norman Tucandidgee to get a fire going and boil the billy. No problem on a rainy day for a fullblooded Aborigine. "Reckon we ought to ask George to lend a hand." I jotted a quick note to George, to say that we were stuck and could he give us a hand with the Department of Civil Aviation (DCA) tractor to tow us out, and gave it to Sandy Captain to take back to him.

In due course we could hear the tractor as it slowly negotiated the steep ridge down to the river and soon George appeared through the foliage. "G'day!", he said, "thought you might have a bit of trouble. Soon have you out John," and he swung the tractor about and we hooked on our ropes, now fastened to the rear bumper. "Let's go!" He gunned the tractor hard while we all pushed as well but it didn't move an inch. Again and again he tried until the ropes broke but the truck just stubbornly sat in the middle of the river.

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[1] In 1990 it was still there and I was able to point it out to my children John and Patty, as we stood in the middle of the Claudie River, this time on a broad concrete bridge recently constructed by the Australian Army engineers. That log may outlast us all!

More rain, more tea, more talk - it was getting dark now and we realised that we could do no more that day. George had no headlights and said he'd better get home and come back in the morning with more ropes and a couple of heavy pulley blocks. "We'll rig up a block and tackle across the river and pull you forward eh? Make it easier on the tractor too." We spent a wet and miserable night but not even hordes of mosquitoes could keep us awake.

Next morning, sure enough, George returned early with the extra gear, all of which belonged, of course, to the DCA. "They'll never know," grunted George in reply to my query of Departmental approval for the use of their tractor, fuel, and assorted gear as well as George's time. "Anyway, there's no white blokes either way for a couple of hundred miles so we've got to help one another."

We soon had a rope fastened to the front bumper bar of the blitz, then up through the great double-sheaved block strung from a tree on the opposite bank, then back across the river where it passed through a single-sheave block attached to a tree then back across the river to pass through the second sheave of the first block and then again across the river to the rear of the tractor. A wave to George and we sat back and waited as George took up the slack and we watched expectantly as he gunned the tractor in its lowest gear. "Now!" But the blitz moved not an inch. So the six of us waded into the river and heaved, while the tractor roared and strained. Not one inch would the truck move.

Again and again we strove, now getting a bit desperate but all to no avail. Finally we undid the tractor and blitz, coiled up the ropes, retrieved the blocks and thanked George for his generous help. "Nah, that's al'right. What are mates for? Sorry I couldn't move the bugger. Bloody inspector coming tomorrow so I'd better have a lash at the grass and keep him happy", and he kicked over the tractor and started up the ridge to catch up on the grass cutting he'd neglected in order to help us. Meanwhile the river was rising. "Let's eat", I said.

After a silent lunch of corned beef and damper washed down with black tea, Ross looked up and said, "Got an idea!" "What's that" I asked, for ideas had not been lacking since we had plunged into the river 24 hours before.

"Bush windlass!" said Ross, "that'll move her. She'll have to move. I know it! I'll get her out if it's the last thing I do! Remember those horses?"[2]

I believed him. Memories of his earlier struggles with two horses aboard the *Torres Strait Herald*, the Church's 45 foot auxiliary ketch, were fresh in my mind. The idea had been to take the horses from T.I. to St Paul's Mission on Moa Island, where they were to be used in pulling a plough. Ross had hobbled them on the wharf and decided to lower them one at a time to the deck. Using the halyards of the *Herald's* mainmast he lowered the first panic-stricken horse and tethered it. While the second horse was being swung aboard a large wave rocked the boat causing the first horse to lose its footing and fall on the deck. The second horse had to hang mid-air until the first horse was securely tethered.

Ross eventually tied both animals prone on the deck so that they were unable to stand and sailed the 25 mile voyage to St Paul's where they were cut free, pushed overboard to swim ashore to gallop for the hills with Islanders scattering before them. It took weeks to catch them. When I heard the full story in the pub later he said, "John, they sure weren't sea horses, but I made up my mind to get 'em there if it was last thing I did!"[3] Now I asked: "What's a bush windlass?" "A bush windlass John, is built of trees, forked log and two long levers." In a short time we had two strong trees selected on the far bank about three yards apart. The choice of the forked tree took a little longer for, as Ross explained it, it was the drum or cylinder of the windlass and it needed to be substantial in diameter but not so thick that it would be too difficult to wind. We cut one down that he selected, leaving a decent fork a couple of feet long and laid it behind the first two trees that were to act as fulcrums.

"But how do we turn it Ross?" "Easy", said he, "we get a couple of good levers now, 18 to 20 feet long." We lugged a chain out, fastened it to the blitz, then dragged the chain to the "drum" and fastened it, taking up the slack. The lever was inserted in the fork. "Heave!" bellowed Ross and

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[2] If it's the last thing I do" was a favourite saying of Ross's which he trotted out whenever confronted with a difficult task such as this and invariably he came out on top.

[3] These were the same horses that Kylie Tennant and Fr Alf. Clint rode when they visited Moa Island in 1956 when gaining material for *Speak You So Gently*.

grudgingly the blitz moved a few inches! "Hold her there!", shouted Ross, "put the other lever in the other side and take the first one out." And so we did. "Heave", shouted Ross and again the blitz moved four inches or so.

Not much, but we could move her! We knew that we could get her out as long as the chain held and we kept working. By now it was getting dark but we were so glad to see the blitz move that no one worried about that. At last we were getting somewhere! We knew we would work on into the night until we hauled her free of the rising river. In fact we worked all night. At 5.30 a.m. next morning, while still dark, we rolled the truck up the bank and threw ourselves exultantly on the ground for the only respite since yesterday's lunch, while the truck stood dispiritedly on the sloping bank with water trickling and dripping from its sodden cargo.

Soon we were at it again. Someone got the fire going and knocked up more damper and corned beef and tea for breakfast; others unloaded the truck and spread things out to dry, while Ross and I set to work on the drowned engine to clean and dry it, stripping the air filter and the carburettor, removing the cylinder head and exhaust manifold and draining the sump, while the electrical gear dried near the fire. Finally we put it all together again, kicked it over and cheered when she caught and fired. By 4.00 p.m. we had repacked and loaded our gear and moved off through the rainforest, which soon gave way to bush where we camped a few miles on at a clearwater creek - the first of many we would cross before arriving at Lockhart River.

Cutting the road as we went, nine days after leaving Portland Roads, we were on the western bank of the Lockhart River, preparing to descend down the rough cutting we had dug as we had done so many times already in the past six days. There might be more than a hundred creeks heading in the coastal mountains to the west and finding their way to Lloyds Bay and the Lockhart River. Whenever we came to such a creek we developed the routine of going on foot, up and down the bank, until we selected a reasonable place where we thought we could make an entry and exit. The creek crossing selected, we would all set to with axes, shovels and mattocks and, after much hard work in which we all joined, we then eased down the bank in the blitz and roared out the other side, with all hands pushing, grimly determined never again to get stuck in a creek.

Now we were ready to cross the Lockhart River itself. Both banks had been prepared and Ross started the engine and the blitz crawled slowly to the top of the bank to make the descent when, with a crash, the engine stopped. We both knew it wasn't being temperamental. Here was trouble! In a blitzwagon the engine is situated under the front seat and the sound was ominous to our ears. The engine would not turn over. Something drastic had happened. Reluctantly we once again set about removing the cylinder head.

Investigations finally revealed a smashed piston. With the mission still 12 miles away there was nothing to be done but make the blitz as safe as possible from the weather and walk to the mission. We expected to be back in a few days or so, if we could get a new cylinder on the next plane. But it would be five weeks before she could follow us and even then would be repaired and driven by another.

We finally arrived at the mission house about 9.00 p.m., all weary after this walk on top of our exertions of the previous nine days, with little sleep at night. We passed through the Old Village on the way home, where our Aboriginal helpmates went to their families. The physical demands of this exhausting journey were felt by all, with Ross affected more than anyone. Bunty was delighted to see us and we very glad to be home, even without the truck. We got cleaned up and Bunty made us a good hot meal while we recounted the highlights of the past days to her and then we went to bed for a good night's sleep, but not before Bunty passed on the family news.

Ross was now running a temperature. He slept in the bedroom under the house and in the morning we were alarmed when we found that, after a wretched night, he could not get out of bed. Sister Doris Brown examined him and Bunty contacted T.I. by radio for advice from the hospital there. The hospital superintendent, Dr Jack Barnes, well known to us from T.I. days, advised us to fly Ross to Cairns hospital by Cairns Aerial Ambulance. However the Ambulance refused to make the trip as the small mission airstrip - built by hand before WWII - was overgrown and had not been used for ten years. A few months before this crisis, the Ambulance plane had landed on the front beach to pick up Simon Ropeyarn, an Aboriginal man who had broken his leg when a windmill we were erecting collapsed. The pilot on that occasion had a difficult time in both landing and taking off and, although he returned safely to Cairns, he had no wish to repeat the experience. Once was enough.

We did everything we could for Ross who maintained that, "I'll get over this John, if it's the last thing I do!" If it had been only the leptospirosis that he was fighting, which both Bunty and I were found to have when our blood samples were later sent to Brisbane, it is likely that he would have made a good recovery in due course, as we both were to do with the help of chloromycetin and six weeks' bed rest. But we were to learn that Ross had a history of heart trouble, and the tremendous exertions of the past nine days had caused further damage to his heart, although he never once complained about this on the trip. This arduous journey was to prove fatal for him and, despite his great strength, both in body and spirit, he died the following morning, Sunday 20 May 1952.

I became ill on Saturday evening and was unable to attend his funeral on Monday which was conducted in the school house by that veteran missionary schoolteacher, Miss Alice Hann, in the absence of Fr Sagi Ambar, who had returned to T.I. enroute to Darnley Island as priest-in-charge there. Ross is buried in the cemetery, half a mile west of the buildings of the old cattle station. A fitting headstone has been raised to mark his resting place among his Aboriginal friends, for whom he gave his life. Bunty and I have no difficulty in recalling the date of Ross' death, it being the 10th anniversary of our marriage.

Bishop John Hudson came to the mission the following Friday and took charge for a couple of weeks, bringing with him Dr Jack Barnes, and another sister from T.I. hospital for our medical well being. I say "our" medical well being, for the highlight of Bunty's family news on our arrival was that she was expecting our fifth child, Carolyn Mary, who was born seven months later at T.I. The usual morning sickness was one thing but, as her physical condition worsened, Bunty was also forced to take to her bed and later was found to be suffering from leptospirosis.

In June Bishop John Hudson arranged for the Superintendent of the Torres Strait Mission, Fr Albert Haley, who was an engineer before his ordination, to fly down and repair the truck and drive it to the mission. A gang of men had by now sufficiently cleared the horse track to Lockhart River for the blitz to make the trip. In due course Albert arrived and next day rode out by horse to the truck with some men, his tools and a new piston, which he installed, and rode home again. The next day he rode out again with the same team and drove the blitz in.

And so it was that in this way and at such great cost, the first truck finally reached the mission, seven weeks after it was unloaded at Portland Roads. Before returning to T.I., Albert got me out of bed and gave me my one and only driving lesson on the flat beyond the school. In later years, he visited me in Rockhampton and, while driving him around the town in my usual way, he wryly remarked that he wished he'd given me two!

Albert Haley is now, at the time of writing, Bishop of the Anglo-Catholic Church of Australia, a small group of people who have broken away from the Anglican Church of Australia for reasons of liturgy and in rejection of the growing acceptance in the Anglican Church of the ordination of women to the priesthood. Albert and I remain good friends.

Building proceeds apace

In October 1952 twenty-four year old Fr Jim Eley, later Archdeacon of Newcastle, arrived with his newly wedded nineteen year old wife Margaret, to take up his duties as Chaplain. Both were destined to be of great assistance over the next three years. Meanwhile, now that we had transport for materials, we required a carpenter to build the houses. By arrangement with Bishop John Hudson, the Rev'd William Namok, a devout Church Deacon and carpenter from St Paul's Mission on Moa Island, now joined us with his family in order to commence the construction of the New Village, as it became known.

The New Village

The existing houses in the Old Village were dirt floored, gable roofed bush huts about ten by twelve feet, sometimes with a door opening but with no door, but more often open on one side in the traditional manner of the gunyah. Mats, woven of pandanus leaf, were unrolled at night on which to sleep on the ground.

The Old Village was situated inland about half a mile from the administrative centre, which consisted of school, food store, hospital and staff houses, all of which were in well-placed situations on the beautiful foreshore of sea, rocks and beach. The site of this New Village was to be between the mission house and the beach, with sea views to the north where Cape Direction, named by Captain Bligh on his epic voyage by long-boat from the *Bounty* to Timor, loomed in the distance.

In consultations with representatives of the people and the staff, we formulated a plan for the New Village, with the future St James church to be placed at the west end of the proposed village about 50 yards in front of the existing mission house. This plan was then explained to the assembled community and was greeted with enthusiasm. It meant that the New Village would be not more than fifty yards from the beach; some houses enjoying beach frontages; all with sea views. It would also mean staff and people lived in much closer proximity with one another.

A multi-cultural problem

Consideration had to be given to the tribal situation. The people of Lockhart were far from being members of one tribe, but mainly the remnants of clans from five tribes, up and down the Peninsula. The first gathering of these clans in 1924 was on the shores of Lloyd's Bay at Waterhole, and families of the various tribes naturally clustered together when camping. But in addition to the larger tribes, there were numerous other people as well.

When the Reverend Dr A.P. Capell, eminent priest, author and linguist, and Emeritus Professor of Anthropology, University of Sydney, was invited to the mission for a week in 1957, he found that there were nine distinct Aboriginal languages represented among our conglomerate group, including one man who was the only person to speak his language, although life had forced him to learn the local "Sand Beach" language. We were, in fact, an Aboriginal multi-cultural society, which included also large families of South Sea Island descent, Torres Strait Islanders and even a Maori as well as Aborigines of European descent.

The tribal grouping was retained when the mission moved to the site at Bare Hill, and the Old Village was originally built. The Old Village housed all occupants of five distinct tribal areas, abutting one another. There was much discussion as to the continuation of this system in the planning of the New Village and many words were spoken for and against the idea.

I pointed out that they had been living in close proximity for 28 years; they had grown used to living together and working together in various ways, such as in cattle work, trochus diving on numerous luggers and lately *Cape Grey*; they had intermarried and had children, who in turn went to school together, and to remember, that we all were worshipping together as

Christians. I suggested that such intermingling of the community was good and that this bonding should now continue, by moving away from the old arrangement of separate areas for different tribal clans. People of different tribes could live beside one another, just as the people were right now, gathered side by side in the community meeting. This idea was discussed, finally accepted, and after further discussion, the consensus was reached that houses should be built six at a time, by community effort, and that none would be occupied until all six were completed. Living on the beach front would prove hugely popular.

The Bora lives again

During these rather lengthy discussions, it was revealed by some old Aboriginal men that their ancient ways had been downgraded. The Bora and Corroborees had now been forbidden for many years and, with the passage of time, were in danger of being forgotten. Many old people had died and with them their intricate knowledge of their culture. Would I agree to them recommencing the Bora and Corroborees? I believed that this restraint, once imposed for reasons of the higher good of the people, could now be seen to be of the order of a cultural and spiritual tragedy. While they were Christians, they were very young Christians, and many of their ways had inspired and served their people well for countless generations before Christ was born. Why should they not continue to do so?

Aboriginal culture is of the very soul of the people and I felt their inborn spirituality must be nurtured from generation to generation, as was mine by my parents and grandparents. But for Aboriginal people, the Bora and its profound, ancient, cultural background looms far larger. It is a vital means to their understanding of life and to their sense of identity. Rituals preserve our identity as a social group, but they also connect people through time. I believe that, by keeping everything as similar as possible to the way in which it was initially done, we connect in a mysterious way with those who have also done it before and even with those in distant time, who commenced it. This is certainly true of the Holy Communion, which was instituted by Jesus at the Last Supper, the circumstances and ritual having, like the Bora, developed over thousands of years, but we still follow His command to "do this in remembrance of Me."

I agreed to relax the rule immediately and encourage the old people to preserve their culture while they could, but never to forget Jesus, who loves us and died to save us all. This decision was greeted with excited acclamation, flashing brown eyes and grinning teeth. It was a far more enthusiastic response than was received for the proposal for the New Village and it was to have far reaching effects on the future lives of us all.

After discussions with the elders a day or two later, they selected an area of dense bush in the corner of the bay and it was set aside for the cultural activities of the old men who, at once, declared it out of bounds for women and children. While not a "sacred site", it nevertheless attained an aura of holiness in the minds of the community. A dancing ground for performing the Bora and Corroborees was also set aside, next to the new store below the New Village.

A new spirit became evident as the messages of recognition and acceptance were lived out. The Bora and Corroborees were to flourish with the years and to become an integral part of the social, religious and cultural life of the mission. The New Village, the cattle industry, trochus fishing and such related activities would cater for the material side of life, while the Church and the Bora would combine in rounding out and fulfilling our spiritual needs and expectations. With the passing years, dancing the Bora and Corroborees were to bond anew all people on the mission.

It was more obvious than ever now, that the Church would need a building in which to gather in worship and fellowship. The building of the New Village now proceeded apace. The timber flooring and corrugated iron for the roof were provided by the State Government. All materials were transported on the blitzwagon, enabling far heavier bush timbers to be used. The houses were constructed of sturdy bloodwood posts sunk into the ground on the ancient post principle, with bloodwood stumps on which were laid plates and floor joists to carry the sawn timber flooring. Walls were then erected, floor boards being used as strengthening diagonal supports with top plates to carry the gable roof rafters on which were laid new corrugated iron. Walls were sheathed with messmate bark, as were the windows, which were hinged for convenience. The floors, being raised a few feet off the ground, were reached by bush-timber steps. Each house was, at first, identical in plan but, with an area of 600 square feet, all were a great improvement on the homes of the Old Village.

The lucky occupants were selected on the basis of one house to a family of each of the five tribes, with two houses to families of the largest tribe living on the mission. These selected names were placed in a hat and the owner's name was ceremoniously drawn in front of each house, the owner at once taking possession of his new home. A few days were then given to feasting, dancing and celebrating while the owners settled in, before work commenced on the next group of six homes.

The people worked with a will for one anothers' benefit. A good spirit was abroad among all. By May 1953 we had twelve houses occupied with another six under construction as well as a Children's Centre complete with kitchen, dining room, communal bathrooms and toilets. The truck was kept busy week days hauling timbers and bark from the bush eight or ten miles distant. Pat Taylor had now joined our staff as a missionary engineer and was to prove most useful in maintaining things mechanical.

Let us build our church

About this time Bishop John Hudson again visited the mission and was warmly greeted in the customary manner, being carried ashore from the dinghy by men, while welcoming hymns were sung by all assembled on the beach. The next morning, the Bishop celebrated Holy Communion in the school, for what proved to be the last time and inspected the houses. Afterwards the Bishop, Fr. Jim Eley and the writer discussed the building of a church over a cup of tea. What was a mission without a church in which to gather together in worship, to foster the spirit of the community? We agreed we needed a church with atmosphere, a building set purposefully apart in which to spread the Good News, to promote fellowship, to foster the understanding of the Christian faith and to worship God, in whose image we are all made. We all agreed a church was essential. But with little money available, we agreed that, if the church was to be built, it could only be constructed, like the houses, from the bush materials on hand. At this point the church was ten miles away, growing in the bush. We agreed that, if it was to be built, it could only be constructed with the help of the teams working under William Namok, now building the houses and the Children's Centre.

William Namok was now included in our discussions, making numerous practical suggestions. An executive decision to build the church was finally

reached, but its construction would mean putting on hold the incomplete houses and the Children's Centre. Work on these would have to be suspended to focus all resources and energies on the creation of the church. Thus our slender resources of money, manpower and one old blitzwagon, precluded other work continuing while the church was being erected. The church site having been decided, a rough design was sketched and though the final building was slightly modified during construction, this sketch was to be our only plan of the church.

All hands to the task!

Now that a firm decision to build the church had been taken, we swung into immediate action and called a general community meeting for 9.00 a.m. next morning, on the site of the proposed church. At this meeting the idea was set out simply and explained at length with all questions were answered. Finally the proposal brought an enthusiastic response and, at the end of the meeting, we laid out the church's dimensions on the ground, pegging the positions of the future post holes.

The church would be in the form of a cross; its length to lay parallel to the sea, with the arms of the cross incorporating the vestry on the landward side of the church and a chapel in memory of Ross Matthews on the seaward side. The nave of the church would be 60 feet long, 55 feet wide at the transepts and 35 feet wide in the nave. The 15 feet deep sanctuary would be in the shape of an elongated arc, with five walls angled to achieve this form. Where these five walls met, a rafter would soar from each junction to meet one another in a peak at the end of the ridgepole of the main roof 30 feet above the floor. A small bell tower above the eastern doorway would be incorporated into the ridge line of the roof. The impact of the building when completed was remarkable in its gracious symmetry.

Despite the church only being marked by a few pegs and marks scratched on the ground, we could visualise its finished state. When someone asked what we should call the church, it was pointed out that St James the Apostle was our patron saint, as the mission was commenced on his day in 1924. We then realised that St James Day fell on the 25th of July and that this was only six weeks away! Could we possibly build the church of St James in six weeks? With many willing hands and God's help we could and did. But it was to be a close run thing!

From then until the church was finished, all other work was suspended or minimised as we moved single-mindedly to the task in hand. The *Cape Grey* trochus shelling venture was put on hold. By this time the captain and crew were on a 50/50 profit sharing arrangement between the mission and the crew, but all hands came ashore and pitched in wherever needed. The stockmen were also caught up in the explosion of excited activity, helping as required, while a small number concentrated on bringing extra "killers" to supplement our food requirements as individual hunting and fishing parties ground to a standstill.

Gangs of men were allocated various jobs. The wood cutting gang were selected from strong young men. Their work was to select and cut the trees required, load and lash them aboard the blitzwagon. The first trees cut were soaring bloodwood trees that were destined to be the massive posts of the church. These were so huge that they could only be snigged in behind the blitz one at a time from where they grew 10 miles away. Another gang at the church site was put to work stripping the bark from these great trees and another to "sap" each one to remove all exterior soft wood and to reveal the rich, red, tough heart of the trees for their entire length.

Meanwhile, the building gangs under William Namok were sinking holes up to six foot deep into which each prepared post was manhandled and, with the ingenious use of two sturdy timber legs and the blocks and halyards removed from the *Cape Grey*, raised and slid into its hole and trued up in every direction before the red soil was shovelled and rammed until the hole was full and the post stood firm and straight.

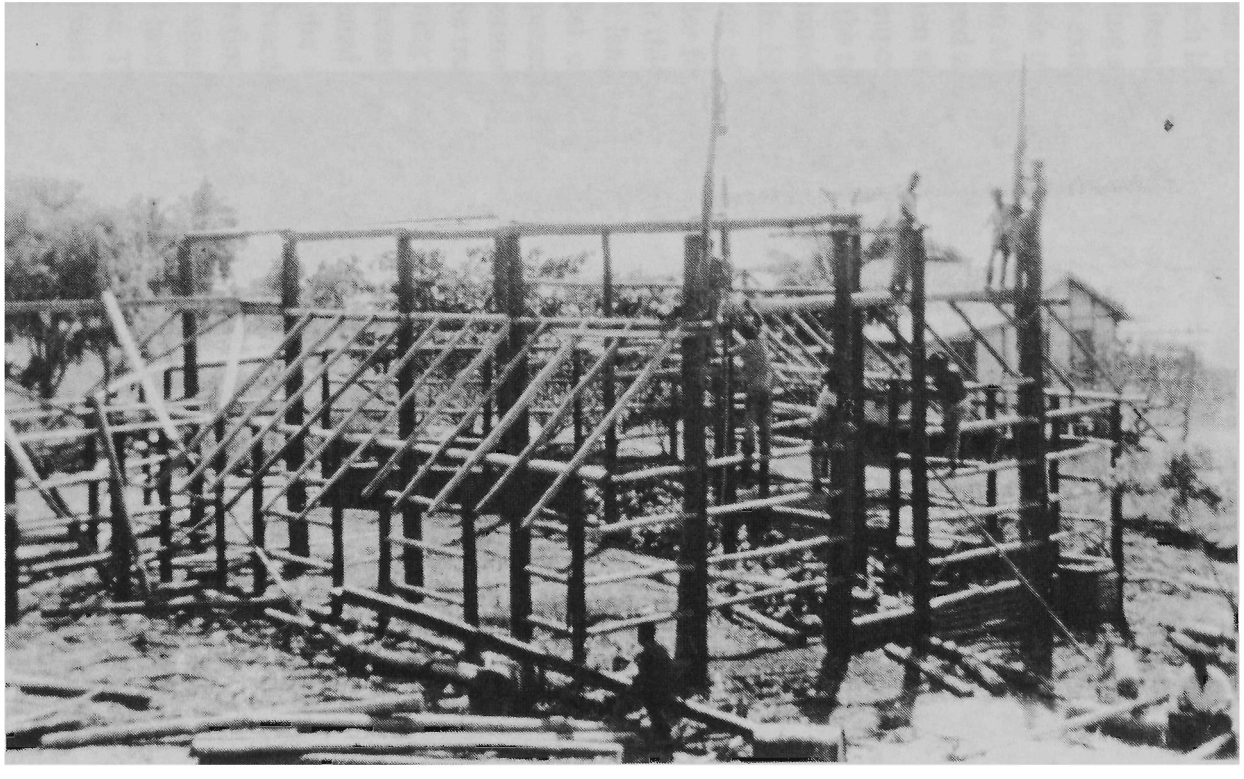
These substantial posts were the main timbers upon which the entire structure of the church would depend and, to enthusiasts like us they seemed aware of it, standing nobly like proud sentinels of the faith. When all were in place, the top of each post was connected by sturdy poles, both across the nave as well as longitudinally. In turn, these connecting timbers were supported and reinforced with other timbers angled into the bloodwood posts, for upon them would be carried the weight of the gable roof. With the bare framework of the nave now in place, the sanctuary was constructed, followed by the transept, containing the vestry on the left and the memorial chapel on opposite sides of the nave. Facing the sanctuary, the vestry was on the right.

In carrying out this work, men swarmed over the building as best they could for we had only two ladders and no scaffolding. Time was of the essence but agility, skill and luck ensured that no one was seriously injured. Messmate timber was used as supports and in framing up the sanctuary, roof and walls. This round timber was barked but not sapped like the great bloodwood posts. Gradually the church took shape and, the timber requirements having been met, the timber cutting gang now turned their attention to removing the messmate bark so that it could cover the entire framework. When the entire roof was covered, a further layer of thick paperbark was laid over the messmate bark to waterproof it, working from the lower level of the roof to the ridgepole, overlaying the top edges of the paperbark. Although up to 1½ inches thick, this type of bark did not have the structural strength to be nailed to the frame in the same manner as the messmate bark had been made fast, and it was therefore securely held by saplings. These were laid parallel with the ridge role and nailed into position on the rafters through both messmate and paperbark with six inch nails. This provided a stable and efficient waterproof roofing which was still in excellent repair, without maintenance, when the writer left Lockhart River Mission seven years later in 1960. However, a cyclone about 1963 damaged the roof though not the structure and, in 1965 the bark roof was removed and replaced with galvanised iron.

The length of messmate bark required to sheet the walls was about ten feet, and that for the roofing at least 17 feet so as to dispense with overlapping between the ridgepole and the gutter line. The carrying of this length of bark posed problems with our short bodied blitzwagon and we found we needed a few men riding on the front mudguards and cabin top to counterbalance the weight of bark extending to the rear.

Cutting messmate bark

Procuring messmate bark is a skill seldom seen today, but such bark played a most important housing need in the bush in earlier years and it may be of interest to record the method used. It is a labour of considerable skill and is not without risk, for the "barker" may be precariously poised 20 feet above the ground. The bark is very strong and tough. To remove the bark it is necessary to cut through the bark of a standing tree to the timber, using a very sharp axe. These cuts are made at both the top and bottom of the



15. St James Church, Lockhart River Mission N.Q.
- under construction mid-June 1952

16. Women stripping and rolling pandanus leaves while others weave the pandanus mat which covered the sanctuary ceiling above the altar.

sheet required in an overlapping, zigzag fashion, extending around the entire diameter of the tree. The cuts are then joined perpendicularly down one side of the tree, again using the overlapping, zigzag method of cutting.

Such ladders as we had were in use in the building of the church, but the men literally rose to the occasion. To enable the cutting of a 17 feet sheet, a sapling about 25 feet long was cut down and trimmed of branches, leaving a fork extending a couple of feet at the top. This was then placed against a suitable tree at an angle of perhaps 45 degrees. Armed with a razor-sharp axe, an Aborigine walked up the sloping sapling and, standing on the fork, chapped zigzag cuts as far as he could reach on either side of the tree trunk. He then shinned down and moved the sapling to the other side of the tree, whereupon he again repeated the walking-up and cutting of the top zigzag until the two were satisfactorily joined. He again shinned down the tree and continued the cutting of the bottom of the proposed sheet at the correct length. Having completed this he now commenced on the vertical zigzag cutting of the sheet as far as he could reach. He then ascended again on smaller forked saplings to continue to cut until the top cut was reached.

At this stage the bark is still firmly attached to the tree throughout its entire length. It is then prised away from the tree with the blade of the axe, special care being taken so that the bark is not split longitudinally. Sharpened small saplings are used to reach further up the trunk. This work is continued until the bark is sprung from the trunk, whereupon it is eased off the trunk and laid upon the ground. At this point the bark is cylindrical, retaining the shape it has taken generations to acquire. If allowed to dry for any reason, the bark cannot be flattened. To be of further use it must be flattened at once. This is achieved by the use of heat. A large fire is used and the cylinder of bark is laid in the flames and passed continually backwards and forwards until the tension of the bark has been relaxed until it can finally but slowly and carefully be laid flat on a cleared area of earth, care again being taken to avoid any splitting lengthwise. Heavy logs are now laid upon the bark to ensure its new shape is retained when it has cooled. The procedure is repeated with subsequent sheets of bark which are then laid upon the first sheet on the ground and the logs replaced.

When thoroughly dried, messmate bark is extraordinarily strong and rigid and will last for many years. Aborigines and other artists use it for their art work.[4]

The women's contribution was substantial

While all able-bodied men were heavily engaged in cutting timber, preparing messmate bark, transporting materials and in the varied work of actually building the church, the task of stripping the melaleucas of their paper bark fell traditionally to the women. This was their special contribution. As many as 25 women were prepared to walk the five or six miles to a swamp where these distinctive trees grew in profusion. Numerous young women carried their babies with them. These were looked after by older women while the younger ones were stripping bark. The paper bark was carefully stripped from large trees in sheets up to three or four feet wide and about six feet long and then piled in heaps. Of all the varieties of melaleuca at Lockhart, there was only one type that enabled the bark to be stripped in such large sheets. Unlike the messmate trees, where the harvesting of bark resulted in the certain death of the tree, paperbark could be removed from the melaleucas without harm to the trees as only the thick, weathered outer covering was removed.

The women had for years been accustomed to stripping, rolling and tying the bark to carry it on their heads to the village but, once again, the ubiquitous blitz proved its worth, day after day bringing in loads of paperbark as, day after day the women carrying tomahawks walked to the swamp, stripped and gathered the bark into heaps before walking home again to prepare a meal for their families. Later many women gathered armloads of pandanus leaf from which they stripped the spine and rolled the leaf in preparation for weaving a magnificent mat which covered the sanctuary ceiling, rising from the top of the reredos to the ridge pole of the roof, a most satisfying labour of love of which they were rightly proud.

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[4] The painting of the Crucifixion in St James Church Lockhart River New Site, was executed in 1955 by the eminent artist Ray Crooke as a reredos for the altar at the Old Site. At the time Ray was employed by the Diocesan Registry and visited the mission to paint a series of scenes on bark but, having to return earlier than expected, the Crucifixion scene was the only one completed.

And so was the childrens'!

The site of the church slopes gently to the sea and, such was the width of the church including the vestry and chapel, that the floor required filling to a depth of 4 feet 6 inches to level it. There were plenty of rocks on the beach front fifty yards away, but the truck was unavailable for carrying stones as it was busy from daylight to dark, transporting loads of timber and bark. The problem was unexpectedly solved when the schoolchildren were enlisted for "after school" work, lugging about two hundred tons of stones over some weeks to fill the floor. It was work they thoroughly enjoyed, yelling and screaming encouragement at each other, feeling they were an important part of the building teams. And so they were. Later, the truck carried tons of soil to level the floor and then clean beach sand to cover the soil.

We are determined to finish the church on time!

This community effort built upon itself as people became caught up in the enthusiasm of watching the church take shape. A fierce determination to finish the church by St James Day resulted in numerous personal initiatives being taken. These became commonplace as people became inspired by individual efforts. The following are two such instances:

In the first instance we had been working long hours, from daylight to dark, but the task seemed insurmountable. One evening, after dark, a group of men turned up to see me. Among them were the Chief Councillor Jimmy Doctor, Matty Ropeyarn, David Marriott, and Frank O'Brien. They put into words what I had been afraid to voice. "It doesn't look as though we're going to finish on time!" I agreed. Despite our best efforts it looked as though the job was beyond us all. But then they went on. "We want to work at night! We've talked about it and we've agreed to work at night! We'll all bring our pressure lamps and work on the church by the light!" And so they did; what great-hearted goodwill. We had no electricity, but every night until 11.00 p.m. and often to midnight, their lamps lit up the church as darkness fell and the work continued. Meals were rostered, some working while others ate. Lunch had already been cut from 1½ hours to half an hour. This was their own idea entirely and indicative of the splendid spirit of enthusiasm among us all. When the sun rose abruptly at 5.00 a.m., all rose for a brief breakfast before resuming their now beloved tasks together.

In the second instance I had ripped a foot long gash in the off-side 16 x 800 front tyre and we had neither spare tube nor tyre. Pat Taylor and his men now took over. Willing hands removed the wheel, stripped out the useless tube, hand drilled holes on either side of the enormous gash and lashed it together with eight-gauge fencing wire, packed hard the tyre with hastily gathered bladey grass, fitted tyre to wheel and wheel to the long-suffering blitz and we were back in action again, losing only two hours. (That tyre lasted for six weeks, when another arrived from the south.) Able-bodied men, women and children, all were now involved in this community activity. The completion of the church was paramount in our thoughts.

The dedicated work continued right up to midday of St James Day, with the final touches of planting mature banana plants around the church hastily carried out as the cry went up that the mission boat, *Mary Lockhart*, had been sighted as she swept around Cape Direction to the north, bearing Bishop John Hudson to consecrate our church. We were more than ready.

The bonding of communal work

The intensive labour, sustained for six weeks, had united and reconciled us all. Our communal commitment to build the church by St James Day had borne unexpected fruit. The rapid planning, the hasty meals, the long hours of labour, the sharing of work in so many ways, the overcoming of difficulties together, solving problems, the timber cutting, the measuring of much, the sawing, lifting, holding, nailing, assessing, the conferring (followed by decisive action), the barking of trees, transporting of timbers and other building materials, the lugging of stones by hand, spreading soil and sand, and a hundred related activities were all carried through with great verve. The banter and chiacking, the putting up with things and with one another, the deepening awareness of people as simply people (regardless of colour); the continual streams of sweat, the sharing and acceptance of small injuries, the aches and pains and humour and deepening respect, the growing affection and equality; all these and much more, contributed to the development of a tremendous spirit among us all.

A spiritual but social occasion

We had become caught up in the creation of something much larger than ourselves, and greater than the splendid church which we had together

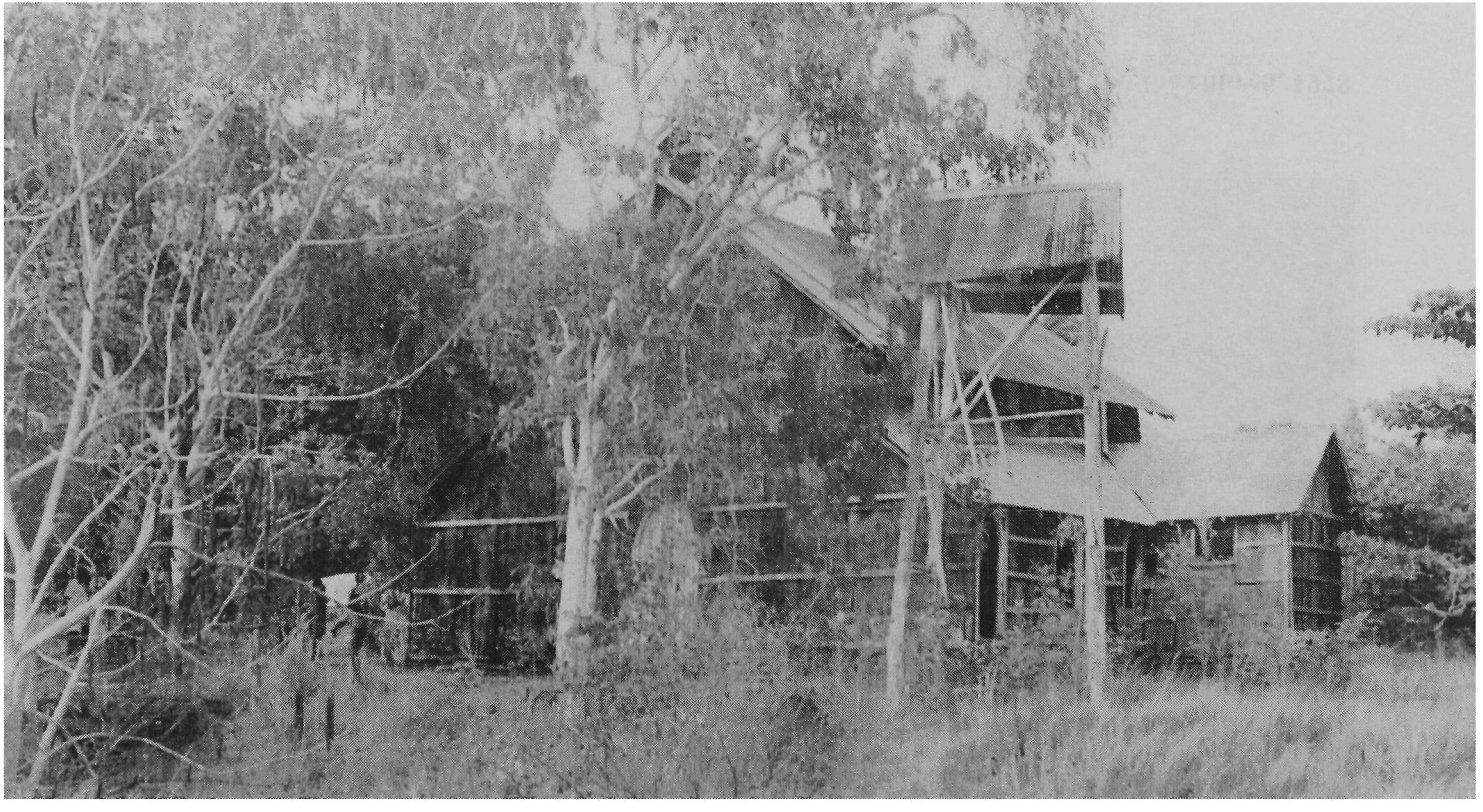
17. St James Church, Lockhart River Mission N.Q. 1955

It was consecrated by Bishop John Hudson on 25 July 1952, amid much rejoicing by all, followed by feasting and dancing. Note the bark roof.

Missionary staff: L-R: Alice Hann, Teacher; John Warby, Superintendent; John Ross-Edwards, Engineer; Garnet Pidsley, Engineer; Bill Ewin, Agriculturalist; Hazel Conn, Nursing Sister. (Not shown: The Rev. F. Jim Eley, Chaplain; Margaret Eley, who took the photo; The Rev. Fr. William Namok, Builder; Beth Pidsley, Teacher; Bunty Warby, Book-keeper and Wireless Operator; John Kaines, Cattle Manager.)

18. St James Church, Lockhart River Mission, 1996

19. People awaiting transport to the New Site after clearing the grass around the church, 1978



20.St James Church 1976

Note the Ross Matthews Memorial Chapel, the galvanised roofing which replaced the bark roof in 1965 and the additional free-standing bell tower.

wrought from the bush, the building of which was the catalyst, and remains the memorial, of the bonding of people to people, people to staff and staff to people, in the spiritual growth of us all. A spiritual but social event had taken place. Together we had built the church and in so doing had found one another and ourselves. We had become a united community. The dignity of the shared common task had brought into being a new awareness and communal dignity, replacing the despair, apathy and rejection of past years. We were on a communal high that was to help us all reach new heights in the years that lay ahead.

A vision dawned of what could become the way to Aboriginal integrity in a white man's world in the years that lie ahead; of what the future with mutual acceptance and trust could hold for us all; a vision which was to have practical expression a year later in 1954, with the formation of the first Aboriginal co-operative in Australia, the Lockhart River Aboriginal Christian Co-operative Society Ltd.

The consecration of our work

This emotional, social and spiritual awareness was sanctified and blessed with the moving and inspiring service of thanksgiving and consecration led by Bishop John Hudson and Fr Jim Eley, as hundreds of voices were raised in devout praise of God, who had inspired us and led us all out of our personal wildernesses into new understandings. We feasted and danced for days and nights. One and all knew that a major feat of change had been wrought among us. The coming years would nurture the new spirit. None of us would be the same again.

Today St James Church stands as a silent memorial to the spiritual rebirth of the Aboriginal people and the missionary staff of Lockhart River Mission. In disrepair, it stands as a memorial whose battered dignity reminds us that in its communal building daily life and future spiritual and material direction of the community were turned around.

Within its walls countless thousands have offered prayers of faith; the Word has been preached; the Body and Blood of Christ have been consecrated and reverently received by human hands, hearts and bodies; forgiveness asked for and received; new hope engendered and love enlivened; marriage vows exchanged; the waters of Baptism poured; the Holy Spirit received; the departed farewelled and the bereaved comforted;

hands laid upon heads, confirming, healing, blessing; fears dispersed; great hymns of praise and thanksgiving have resounded, many being of Aboriginal creation; friendships strengthened; enemies reconciled; souls have been sanctified; God has been glorified.

A symbol of reconciliation and our heritage

Now, the State Government has taken over the material responsibilities from the Anglican Church, and in 1967 moved the entire community to a more accessible area near Iron Range air strip known as the New Site. The Church of England maintains a spiritual role with the people and a new church has been built.

The church at the Old Site, built with such vigour and devotion, has fallen into disrepair. However when the writer, with two of his now adult children, John and Patty, visited the Old Site for a week in 1990, we were surprised to see a considerable number of residents had returned from the New Site to the Old Site, to live in small houses of their own making. The abuse of alcohol at the New Site was a factor in this decision, but it was only one factor. Nostalgia was another, for the memory of those early days together is still strong. The desire to live right on the beach front instead of a few miles distant is another, for the call of the sea with all its resources is very relevant to the coastal people of the Lockhart community.

When the school holidays come around, numerous children and families return to the Old Site to camp out and consequently facilities there have been improved. The Church of St James should be part of this improvement. The church should be repaired and maintained continually. It should be preserved as a mark of multi-cultural Aboriginal Christian heritage and as a standing memorial to the ever present need for reconciliation. It should become again a continuing centre of worship. A great Bora should be held nearby, at least each year. The Church is not only a memorial to the dedication and love of past generations, but an inspiring witness of faith to the present, and of great hope to those unborn. Let us bend every endeavour to ensure it so remains.